

# New veterans affairs minister promises 'respectful' approach

Erin O'Toole seeks to build better relationship after predecessor's troubled tenure

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Veterans Affairs Minister Erin O'Toole is pledging to create an "informed and respectful dialogue" for Canada's veterans, an apparent bid to mend fences with a constituency that had been at odds with his predecessor, Julian Fantino.

The new dialogue will address the "opportunities and challenges" that veterans face, O'Toole told a luncheon gathering of the Rotary Club of Toronto on Friday, in his first public speech since being appointed minister Jan. 5.

"In the last two years we haven't always seen that, (respectful dialogue) and that's not serving veterans," O'Toole told the crowd of Rotarians and veterans. "Let's talk about some of the challenges we have and a plan to fix some of those challenges."

Among those challenges is the mental health of veterans, an area Canada needs to become a leader in, O'Toole said. Mental health injuries resulting from military service have increased by 100 per cent in the last five years, he noted.

"We have to meet rising new needs of (increased) demand," O'Toole

said, noting that, by the end of this year, there will be a network of almost 24 operational stress injury clinics in the country to address that increased mental-health need.

Even when there's disagreement, politically, with veterans or their advocacy organizations, "let's agree to do that respectfully, and show care and compassion to those who have served us," he told the audience.

O'Toole replaced former Veterans Affairs minister Julian Fantino, who was demoted by Prime Minister Stephen Harper after a series of disputes with veterans. Heading toward a fall election, the move was seen as a first step in repairing the relationship with veterans.

Fantino came under fire when it was revealed that Veterans Affairs had let lapse more than \$1 billion in funding since 2006 during the same period that wait times to process veterans' applications for support had grown.

On Friday, O'Toole promised a "veterans-centred" approach during his time on the file. He also vowed to create a seamless relationship between the Department of Defence and members of the armed forces, and Veterans Affairs.

O'Toole, an MP for Durham, is a Royal Military College graduate who served 12 years with the Canadian Armed Forces. After leaving the military he practiced commercial law.



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Erin O'Toole was appointed veterans affairs minister on Jan. 5.